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### Break for commuters

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When Lorinda Chamberlain commutes to work in Manhattan, she saves on payroll taxes.

That's because of a plan her employer, Auritt Communications Group, introduced early last year at her suggestion.

For Chamberlain, that's \$76 a month in MetroCard costs. That money is deducted from her gross salary, and Chamberlain is only taxed on the amount she's paid.

Then, her company pays WageWorks for her MetroCards — which are mailed directly to her Brooklyn Heights home every month.

Chamberlain, 35, said most of Auritt's employees are participating in this program."

"The program is not only a money-saver but is also very convenient," said Chamberlain, who is Auritt's business manager.

And her employer isn't alone in adopting ways to help employees with their commute to work. Even before gas prices breached \$3 a gallon, concern had been mounting about the time, cost and sometimes even the environmental toll commuting to work was taking.

But the jump in gas prices fueled simmering problems.

And more people and companies are seeking commuting alternatives — from greater use of mass transit to working from home — to save time and money, experts say.

Use of public mass transit is clearly on the rise. In the metro area, more employers and workers are signing up for tax-saving commuting programs, among them is the use of public transportation.

At the end of 2004, 28% of companies in the metro area offered tax-advantaged transit benefits to their employees, reported Larry Filler, president of TransitCenter.

Today, that percentage is about 33%, estimated Filler, whose company provides the TransitChek commuter benefits programs to companies.

In Manhattan, mass transit commuter programs are the most popular, according to John Galgano, president of CommuterLink.com, a nonprofit commuter assistance program funded by the state Transportation department.

In other boroughs, demand "is more equally divided" between public mass transit benefits and carpooling and van pooling-type services, he said.

How do commuter benefits work for employees? According to IRS rules, companies can provide workers with up to \$105 a month as a nontaxable benefit for use with public transit or vanpooling. In addition, employees also can get a tax-advantaged commuter parking benefit of up to \$205 a month.

A common — but not exclusive — way of providing the benefit: Employers let workers pay their commutation through a pretax payroll deduction.

How much workers save depends on their tax bracket and amount of their payroll deduction.

The calculator on TransitCenter's Web site, [transitcenter.com](http://transitcenter.com), shows that an employee with an annual \$55,000 salary paying \$105 a month in commuting costs (excluding parking) would save \$34 a month, or \$408 annually, in taxes by participating in a corporate-sponsored plan that lets workers deduct commuting costs from their pre-tax income.

Other tax-advantaged commuting options: Companies can also give workers up to \$105 a month tax-free for commuting via mass transit or vanpooling.

In addition, companies can pay a portion of workers' commutation and let employees pay the remaining cost with pretax earnings.

Such benefits also provide companies with tax advantages that depend on the type of program offered.

Of course, employers have other ways of helping staffers with their commutes to work.

The Westchester Division of New York Presbyterian Hospital and five Westchester sites of IBM are among those that have earned the Environmental Protection Agency's designation as Best Workplaces for Commuters.

IBM's various contributions: The company ensures that many of its work sites in Westchester and New York City have convenient access to public transit, said Patrick Blanchfield, site operations manager for IBM's Westchester (County) Region.

Moreover, about six months ago, IBM's Westchester sites began using the NuRide carpooling service administered for the company by MetroPool. Via a computer, NuRide allows employees to find drivers or riders with whom they can carpool.

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